



File Code: 1950; 2410
Date: May 17, 2021

Dear Interested Party:

The Clinch Ranger District (Clinch RD) of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests (GWJNF) is proposing a vegetation management project on Powell Mountain northeast of Duffield, Virginia and southeast of Big Stone Gap, Virginia. The Devils Hens Nest Vegetation Project would increase the health and resiliency of the ecosystems within the project area and provide high-quality timber and forest products to the local economy.

This project will be consistent with the goals and objectives described in the *Revised Land and Resource Management Plan Jefferson National Forest* (hereinafter referred to as the Forest Plan). An environmental assessment (EA) will be prepared as part of the planning process for this project. Decisions resulting from the analysis will address actions needed to maintain or improve resource conditions in the project area.

We are seeking your input. If you have information that would contribute to a decision regarding this project, please send your comments, in writing, by Friday, June 18, 2021. The information you provide will help in the development of the proposal and alternatives that will address issues identified for this action. A thorough description of the proposal, alternatives, and analysis of the effects of each alternative, will be documented in the EA. You can view project information and documents online as they become available at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=60116>

In an effort to increase efficiency and reduce costs, future communications for this project will be electronic. If you would like to continue to receive these communications, please provide your email address via this web form

<https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?Project=60116>

If you do not have access to email or the internet and would like to continue to receive these communications, please contact Christopher Brown, South Zone NEPA Planner (see contact information below).

Project Location

The Devils Hens Nest Vegetation Project is located on the National Forest System (NFS) lands within Scott County. It is approximately 6 miles northeast of Duffield, Virginia and 5 miles southeast of Big Stone Gap, Virginia. US Highway 58-ALT, which turns into US 23 as it heads south, parallels the western boundary of the project area, varying from about 0.5 to 2 miles away at different stretches of the boundary.



The project area (including non-NFS lands) is approximately 13,100 acres in size and spreads across the Cove Creek and Stock Creek sub-watersheds. It is located within the Big Stone Gap and East Stone Gap topographic quadrangle maps.

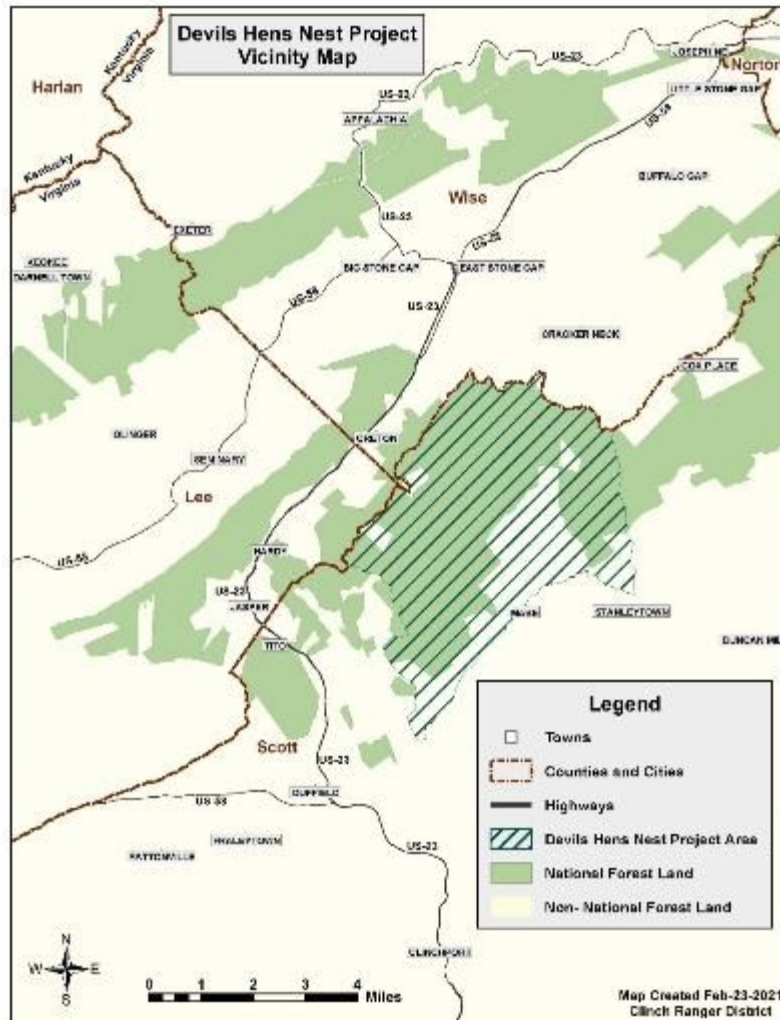


Figure 1. Devils Hens Nest Vegetation Project location

Purpose and Need

The purpose and need of the Devils Hens Nest Vegetation Project is to address the difference between current conditions as they exist on the ground and the desired conditions described in the Forest Plan.

There is a need to shift the current age class distribution in the project area to increase the amount of early successional forest type and to maintain tree growth and vigor and as a result provide wood products. This is in alignment with plan direction within the 10B - *High Quality Forest Products* and 8A1 - *Mix of Successional Habitats in Forested Landscapes* Management

Prescriptions (Rx). In addition, the Forest Plan directs that “*Where forest management activities are needed and appropriate to achieve the desired composition, structure, function, productivity, and sustainability of forest ecosystems: a result of such activities will also be to provide a stable supply of wood products for local needs.*” (Goal 15, pg. 2-32).

The project focus will be to increase the health and resiliency of the ecosystems within the project area and to provide high-quality timber and forest products to the local economy. Currently, the project area is overrepresented with late-successional closed-canopy conditions due to a lack of disturbance over the previous decades. A mixture of silvicultural treatments (including regeneration harvests, commercial and non-commercial thinning, site preparation treatments, and prescribed fire) would facilitate the development of desired ecological conditions as described in the Forest Plan.

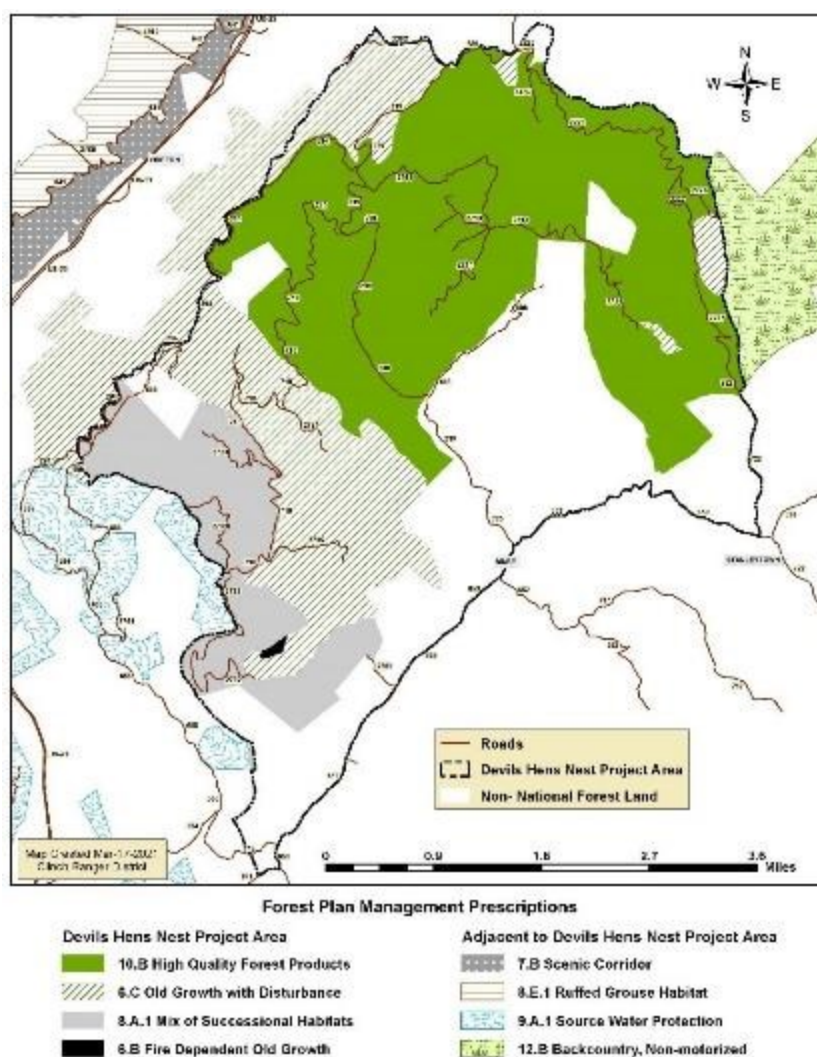


Figure 2. Devils Hens Nest Vegetation Project and Forest Plan Management Prescriptions

Although not depicted in Figure 2, the 11 – *Riparian Corridors* Management Prescription is embedded in other management prescriptions and is present within the project area. Management emphasis in this Rx is to retain, restore, and/or enhance the inherent ecological processes and functions of the associated aquatic, riparian, and upland components within the corridor.

In addition to the Rx 11 considerations within the project area, there is a need to maintain and/or improve the current watershed conditions associated with water quality and aquatic habitat. The project overlaps the Clinch River/Stock Creek/Cove Creek watershed (06010205050-P13)¹ that has been identified in the Forest Plan as a Priority Watershed which possess outstanding aquatic biodiversity. It contains Federally listed species and is covered by the *Federally Listed Endangered and Threatened Mussel and Fish Conservation Plan* (Conservation Plan) developed by the Forest in close coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The project is located within two 6th level sub-watersheds (Stock Creek and Cove Creek) that are both currently rated as “Functioning Properly”. Pre-planning analysis has identified several factors that threaten this rating which include an inactive mining claim, the existence and use of unauthorized roads and trails, and a Forest System road in need of maintenance and repairs. These factors should be addressed before they can further impact water quality and the aquatic habitat within the project area. Due to a lack of fire disturbance, the current fire regime condition indicator for both watersheds is poor, indicating that there the potential for altered hydrologic and sediment regimes in the project area.

Proposed Action

The proposed Forest Service vegetative treatments will be designed to move conditions towards the desired canopy structure and successional composition for the respective Management Prescriptions, as they are described in the Forest Plan. The project should include ways to:

- Facilitate desired conditions of ecological succession and age class distribution.
- Increase species diversity and heterogeneity of forest canopy structure.
- Improve growing conditions for residual stock of treated stands.
- Increase resilience to forest threats, such as insects, pathogens, destructive wildfires, and impacts related to climate change.
- Control and prevent the proliferation of non-native invasive plant species.
- Promote the establishment of advanced oak regeneration to maintain prominence of oaks on the landscape.
- Retain and promote southern yellow pine species on appropriate sites.
- Use prescribed fire, when appropriate, to accomplish ecological objectives.

¹ Naming conventions and HUC boundaries were refined and updated in 2007, subsequent to the development of the 2004 Forest Plan and Conservation Plan. 0601020505P13 corresponds to 060102050604 – Cove Creek and 060102050605 Stock Creek.

- Maintain or improve watershed conditions with actions such as road maintenance or decommissioning, rehabilitation of compacted areas, culvert work for aquatic organism passage, and stream habitat improvements.

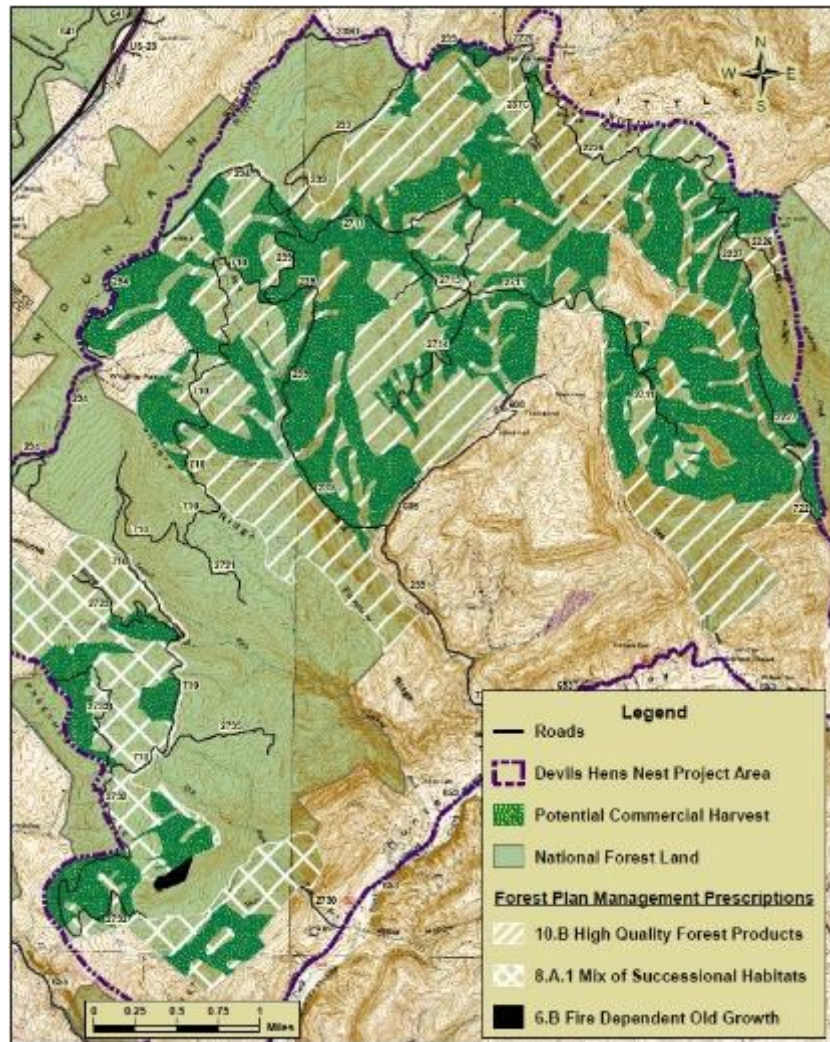


Figure 3. Potential Commercial Treatments

Decision to be Made

The Clinch District Ranger is the responsible official for this project and will decide whether to implement project activities as described in the proposed action, provide alternatives to the proposed action, or to refrain from implementation of the proposal and continue with current management. The responsible official will also determine if there may be significant impacts that would require the preparation of an environmental impact statement.

Implementation of the Devils Hens Nest Vegetation Project could begin immediately follow the decision by the District Ranger, which will be made after the close of the objection period.

Scoping Input Needed

Written comments concerning this proposal will be accepted during a 30-day scoping period ending on Friday, June 18, 2021. Comments may be submitted through the Devils Hens Nest Vegetation Project website via the web form (<https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?Project=60116>). This web form can also be accessed from the project website:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=60116>

On the right side, you can select "Comment/Object on Project."

Written comments can also be submitted hardcopy to:

USDA Forest Service
ATTN: Joe Elliott, Project Leader
1700 Park Ave, SW
Norton, VA 24273

Please share any specific concerns and/or alternatives that you feel need to be considered within the context of this proposed action. Make your comments as concise as you can and address the proposed action specifically.

This project implements the Jefferson National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and is not authorized under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA). The project is subject to the objections process at 36 CFR 218, subparts A and B (<http://www.ecfr.gov>). Only specific written comments received during this or any other designated opportunity for public comment provide standing for objections. Also, to meet standing for objection, comments must meet the requirements of 36 CFR 218.8. For more information on the objection process and requirements, you may contact Christopher Brown at (540) 953-3570, or by email at christopherjbrown@fs.fed.us.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and contact information of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record of this analysis, and will be included in the final project record. Pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27 (d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered.

If you do not have comments at this time but would like to be informed of this analysis as it progresses, please let us know. If you do not respond to this request, you will be removed from future mailings regarding this project unless you have previously asked to be kept on the mailing list.

If you have any questions concerning this project or would like to know more information about it, please contact Joe Elliott, Project Leader, at (276) 782-4365, or by email at joseph.elliott@usda.gov If you should have any questions about the environmental assessment process contact Christopher Brown, South Zone NEPA Planner, (540) 953-3570, or by email at christopherjbrown@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,

X

Michelle W. Davalos

Signed by: MICHELLE DAVALOS
MICHELLE W. DAVALOS
District Ranger